

Intersection of Foundry & Elm Streets**Vine City Neighborhood****Atlanta, GA****3:45 A.M.**

Irving 'Smack' Black, Jr., 'membered one of his movie heroes Gordon Geico or Gekko or whatever his name been was great philosophizin', he ain't never lied, 'cause greed was good. Whether it been was Wall Street or insurance, he ain't never known greed to be anything other than good. Right now, this homeboy was good and greedy and hopefully a little lucky, in additional. Lucky enough not to squeezed the trigger on his .380 semi-automatic. It been chillin' in his front pants beneath his black hoodie hidin' under a short brown leather jacket liked bottles of *Cristal* in a bucket a ice durin' a Saturday night 70s 'Blue Lights in the Basement House Party' in the SWATs. He needed a breathin' mask after all that been was done in his thinkin'.

He chilled with his back kissin' the rear fender of a suped up 90s Cadillac and he faced a ol' school Toyota Corollary. He kept quiet 'cause this part of Atlanta was so fulfilled up with drugs and all that came with it that it was always bein' raided by Red Dog and Narcotics Units of the ATL. They gots good reason to be out in Vine City and so did he. He peeped around the left side of the fender and there it been was: Like fifty yards away at Foundry and Vine Streets, couple a brothas eased down Vine and stood next to a apartment compound and the bent down 'Stop' sign. They watchin' everything and everyone and everybody and everywhere and all them other everys.

His breathin' raced now. He ain't never prayed much in his 37 years mainly 'cause again he was so lucky in his job. Plus, his .380 ain't a bad god to have at his side whenever he needed a loyalty friend. Ain't let 'im down befoe, why tonight gotta be dysfunctionality at all? Dysfunctionality. Yeah, the sistahs gave up the lovin' to a brotha with a good vocational. Yeah, they did. He told himself to chill that and checked out the scene down the street. That's it. Bags of cocaine and thick wads of cash like a sistah in baby-got-back-*Apple Bottom* jeans! He tasted the *Cristal* now!

Just as he started to shuffle backward toward the curb for the right side of the Caddy, a black van cruised straight up at him. He ducked and crawled under the Caddy. After the van passed him, his right hand founded the .380 and showed it with a stiff arm. He aimed lyin' on his stomach tryin' to spot a better view with another car parked in front of him. Motor oil and gas stanked on the pavement below him, which meant it was on his leather coat! Ain't that some dysfunctionality chitlins with corn kernels and dirt at the bottom of the pot? Focus, G'!

As the van slowed down near the buy, he heard convo'. A little get-to-know-ya' small talk from the van 'foe the real deal jumped off. Now, two brothas in dark clothes popped out the front of the van. Red light, stop; yellow light, caution and slowed

down...the green ain't comin' fast enough for everybody, anybody, somebody, nobody and all the other bodys includin' him. Well, that changed like now, a'ight. He strained to slide with the grit and grime and gas and oil under the Caddy. That's when a little somethin', somethin' jumped off with raised voices and gun hammer clickins. Yeah, it was on now.

From his snake belly crawlin' spot, the van brothas gots the drop on the local homies. One man snagged the big blue canvas bag and the other latched on to the second black canvas bag. And the van boys gots on black masks, likewise. He needed to flow with his plan 'foe them Red Dogs and Narcs crashed the party. Ain't no house lights flicked on yet and that was mo' luck and mo' good.

Then ta-a-dow! What was goin' on with a dark four-door sedan stoppin' at the corner a Graves and Foundry. Might be APD U.C. The driver kicked a little gas and made the short trip up Foundry and stopped in front a the van. Two mo' dudes in baggy dark clothin' and black masks announced they presence like Santa Claus and Rudolph at Xmas. 'Cept they used .9mms aimed at the van boys. Man, this ain't no good. He didn't figure on usin' his own black mask hidden in his inside jacket pocket since he black as night moreover, but with all this noise now, he ain't got no choice.

He flipped his vision on the scene and into his jacket pocket, the scene, his jacket pocket, the scene, his jacket pocket. Then shots shocked his body like he got shot! His head slammed into the under the carriage of the Caddy. He froze liked a snow cone. Voices panickin' and like God in the *Bible* said, "Let there be light" and there been was in a house needin' Extreme Makeover 'Hood Edition. He scrambled like eggs in a cast iron pan to his feet. Now, he tripped out so bad he wanted to snag a handful a ol' cigarette butts layin' 'bout and smoke 'em right there. Heart beatin' and sweat pourin' ...body and mind quittin', but naw, he ain't goin' nowhere without the score, baby.

Mask on and his mind tellin' him he had heart, he breathed three times, bended down and ran along the parked cars and the concrete curb with the .380's hammer cocked. From the front of the Caddy, he saw two men down on the ground. The van brothas. The dark sedan dudes pointin' them shiny black 9 mils at them apartment/stop brothas 'bout gave 'im a *Fred Sanford*, "This is the big one", heart attack momentumum. They arguin' somethin', somethin' 'bout, 'Can't take the money, fool!' When he started risin' up, mo' shots woked up the dead or alive. This time the apartment/stop brothas, unarmed, they fault, just died. Them dark sedan dudes tripped out now. They runnin' for they sedan when mo' lights turned the night into a Smoky the Bear fire. Seconds after that and he ran along that curb behind cars so close they right across from him now, he down low and aimed again when mo' shots from some brothas on his side of the street tap danced the road and the dark sedan. Funny thing was though he ain't heard no laughin', the dark sedan dudes ain't fired back in self-defensive. All they done was run to the sedan with both bags in hand. Then mo' shots brokeed some of the

sedan's windows. The driver dropped his bag as the sedan rolled through the shootin'. Footsteps pounded the sidewalk for him and he hated to do it, but he ducked under another car and played dead. Those feet ran passed and behind him. Screamin', shoutin', guns firin', feet runnin', tires squealin'. Chaos, man. Again, through that snake belly spot, the brothas who done did the shootin' and runnin' ran across the road and dragged the two apartment/stop brothas down Elm Street and outta sight. It was now or never, Irving.

He checked the area everywhere and all those other everys. Saw the black canvas bag 'bout three feet in front of 'im. The blue bag just sat next to the two dead van brothas. Too far away and now mo' sirens, mo' sirens, mo' sirens, mo' sirens. He dove for the bag that was closest. He heard mo' gunshots around the corner. Luckily for him, he ain't parked around that corner. He fastwalked west on Foundry and hung a quick left on Sunset Avenue. That's where he parked his tricked out green Mazda Hatchback 323 that would make them *West Coast Customs* and *Pimp My Ride* TV shows proud. His imagination seen cops and ambulance on the scene now. The gunshots stopped. So did the screamin', shoutin', runnin' and squealin'. Peace, man. When he unlocked his Mazda, he threw the bag on the passenger front seat. Still hyped all over, he lost the temptation not to check inside. Was it been the drugs or the money? Unzipped the black bag, either one was a solid, and hello Benjamins! He laughed lookin' around as he did. This was easier than he ever thought it could been was. It all been a part of his philosophizin' strategically that went down a somethin', somethin' liked this: Firstly, 'Done did unto others befoe they done did unto himself'. Secondarily, 'Life helped them who then helped themselves'. Thirdarily, and the bestest one, 'Revenge was a dish bestest served by takin' everything from anyone, everyone, someone but not no one 365/24/7'. Yeah, baby!

In the midst of his merriment, someone watched him through a camera lens and snapped his photograph. Then, cross hairs sized him up when he cranked the Hatchback's engine and calmly slipped unnoticed into the distant crying and agonizing night.

Atlanta Public Safety Headquarters
Office of the Chief of Police Harriet Davis/5th Floor
226 Peachtree Street, SW
Downtown Atlanta
7:30 A.M.

In a conference room around a monstrosity of a wooden table sat some of the upper brass of the Atlanta Police Department. In her pressed uniform blues standing at the head of the table was early forties African-American Chief of Police Harriet Davis. Closest to her on the left sat a late thirties black man, Major Ennis James Butler, representing the Chief of Staff. The late forties white male, Major Mario Genovinazzo, seated next to Butler, represented the Special Enforcement Section, which covered seven different squads like Homeland Security, the soon to be disbanded Red Dog Unit, Narcotics and Vice Units and a couple of handful of sub-units.

To Davis' right seated side-by-side was a 30s white woman that represented the Office of Professional Standards (OPS) including Internal Affairs and Corruption Unit, Major Alexandria Greene. Positioned by Greene was a mid-forties white man holding down the Deputy Chief of the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) position overseeing the Major Crimes Section including Homicide, Special Victims, Fugitive Units and others was Frank Vinson. Perched next to him was Sergeant Malcolm X. Hobbs commander of all the Homicide Detectives in the Criminal Investigations Division during the Day Watch, whose hours varied by need.

The tension was palpable, Malcolm thought. No small wonder after the overnight activity for lack of a more appropriate term. He understood why the other high-ranking officials were present, but internally wrestled with why he was called in as well. On the other hand, since he supervised all of the Homicide Detectives on first shift, it stood to reason he should be seated with the higher ups. Chief Davis cleared her throat, scanned the room with hands intertwined behind her back as usual and commenced.

"I wish I could say it was a good morning, but it isn't. As I'm sure you're all aware, overnight in Vine City, we had a double homicide. In and of itself, that might not be anything overly surprising. However, what are the identities of the victims. Lamont Kendricks and Harold Castle. For those of you not in the loop, Kendricks and Castle were part of the Narcotics Enforcement Unit, which ultimately answers to the Special Enforcement Section and Major Genovinazzo.

"The problem we all have as APD officials is Kendricks and Castle weren't on shift at the time of their death am I correct, Mario?"

“Yes ma’am, you’re correct. In addition, there was no known operation in that area from Narcotics, Centralized Narcotics, Weed & Seed nor H.I.D.T.A. last night. Yes, ma’am.”

Davis nodded and faced the table surfaces. “Very well then. I’m going to back up that statement with additional witnesses on the official record with Major Greene and OPS. I want a full account from you Mario and every detective on duty overnight in the Narcotics Enforcement Unit except the Financial Investigations Unit. I want full discovery from Homeland Security’s Gangs and Guns Squad—”

“I can assure you Chief Davis that Gangs and Guns wasn’t involved—”

“Get it done Mario and don’t interrupt. Once Alexandria has all requisite accounts on record, I will coordinate with Ennis and the Public Affairs Unit to create a statement for the media and the city of Atlanta, which brings me to Frank and Malcolm of CID. There’re very few cases CIDs Major Crimes Section of units, task forces and investigations haven’t solved over the years and that covers all manner of criminal activity.”

Davis strolled from her power position at the head of the conference table to her right. Head down, she stared at the beige carpeted flooring past Major Greene and ceased her shortened paces between Chief Vinson and Malcolm. Had he recalled thinking the tension was palpable? If that was an understatement, what words would do Chief Davis’ stance between the men justice with this powder keg of a public relations nightmare?

“Frank, Malcolm. I am extremely grateful for having the first-rate professionalism on the Atlanta Police Department staff that you two bring every day. I mean every day. I know I can count on you whenever a criminal offense crosses our city limits. But these men are our fellow brothers in arms. I want this to be the very definition of the swiftest justice CID and Homicide has ever exacted. I can think of no one better to lead this investigation, wherever it may lead, than you and The X-Men. This case takes precedence over all other homicides on and off the X-Men’s watch. Be very strategic and shrewd in your assignment dispensing, Malcolm. Kendricks and Castle are the main arteries and you stop the bleeding like right now. We understand each other, Sergeant?”

“Yes, Chief. The X-Men are all over it.”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve lost officers nor the first time our officers’ actions have placed themselves under a number of microscopes. With everyone’s cooperation and professionalism, may this be the last time for both. We have a job to do and if, no when, we perform them as we should, this will be the last time. Dismissed.”

**Atlanta Public Safety Headquarters
Homicide Unit/ 3rd Floor
Sergeant Malcolm X. Hobbs' Office**

7:55 A.M.

Malcolm stood up before his team behind his desk sporting a white long sleeved dress shirt with red, black and pink stripes. A vertically lined black tie upon a solid red background streamed down his torso covering his shirt's black buttons. Solid black dress pants, belt and black Nino Carutti wing tips completed his ensemble. The remainder of Atlanta Homicide's elite X-Men Unit either stood, the men, or sat, the women, in chairs settled in front of Malcolm's desk.

"All right. Let's start at the beginning because you know what the cliché phrase says about one who assumes. Are you all up on this latest homicide case early this morning?"

Malcolm took an optical survey of his team and surmised they all sat in ignorance.

"You didn't hear?"

"Sorry bro', I personally don't take in the bad news before I investigate the bad news. I was like that even before bein' a cop," Orlando said.

Orlando Queen, a mid-thirties African-American five year veteran of homicide investigations with the X-Men Squad, stood against the wall nearest Malcolm's door. While grasping a three subject spiral notebook in one hand and sipping a Styrofoam cup of black coffee in the other, the like pigmented detective dressed himself in his cooler weather signature outer wear of an all-black leather knee length overcoat. Standing just under six-feet tall and weighing about one-hundred and eighty pounds, Queen oscillated between mule mean nasty intimidation and shrewd, clever psychological pinpricked analysis at whomever and wherever his instincts and experience led him.

"Well, this would have been a good day to break that philosophy."

"What's the matter, boss? You definitely appear stressed this morning."

Selena hadn't known the half, the quarter, the three quarter nor the whole of it not necessarily in that order, Malcolm thought. Then he thought about something else. How this case affected his youngest detective. Selena Monet started in the Vice Unit and handled a number of undercover assignments. She took many of them to the utmost conclusion and almost lost her life on a handful of them to criminals who desired their amorous attention through the violence of rape. She bounced to his X-Men Squad after driving her Vice superiors up the wall, ceiling and roof before they told her enough was enough and to find another division. Hello, Sergeant Hobbs. She mellowed since joining homicide, but her remaining that way was a wait-to-be-seen event and here's why.

“You’re perceptive, Selena. I am a bit stressed. The case Chief Davis has brought to our attention and it takes priority over all other cases pending and unfortunately, most likely, future homicides, involves the shooting deaths of two of our own brothers.”

“Who boss and anyone we know?”

“Detectives Lamont Kendricks and Harold Castle—”

“Of the N.E.U.?” Orlando asked. “I’ve known those cats when I was on patrol how many years ago now? Sonuva gun blowin’ away the perps responsible. Yeah, oh yeah, you got my undivided, Malcolm.”

His anger demanded some action so he drained his steaming hot coffee while grimacing and rapid inhaling cooled his tongue. He crushed the coffee cup with drips of the liquid running down his hand which he caught with his napkin before they hit the floor.

Selena’s hands found her face, gave it a quickie massage and dropped them unto Malcolm’s desk surfaces behind his computer monitor. After some light tapping and heavy thinking, she pulled up her long sleeved, lime green with big and little blue, yellow and black dots knit sweater. Yellow slacks, a blue braided leather belt and more lime green on her mid-heeled pumps completed her outfit but not her satisfaction with Malcolm’s information.

“Those two trained me when I was a Vice rookie. Took me under their wing, shared chest bumps when I succeeded and stomped my face and ground it into powder when I failed. Tough amigos. Tough, but fair. It may not speak well of me to speak ill of the dead, but I still believe to this day they were prejudiced against women. Or maybe it was just bi-racial women. On the other hand, maybe it was just me. Nevertheless boss, this is a must close case. I don’t know if we can get closure for the deceased relatives, but we may need it, at least Orlando and I, as much as the families. Whatever it takes, boss. Whatever it takes.”

Malcolm slowly nodded. He also agreed with most of what she recalled about Kendricks and Castle too. Womanizers by trade when ‘successfully’ mackin’ the ladies and were a bit chauvinistic when the bumping and grinding wasn’t forth coming from their targeted conquest. This was one reason Orlando had such a strong reaction to the news. Wild dogs ran in packs and Detective Queen sir knew this higher-up, despite strong disagreements about life and work, as his friend warned him about his lifestyle choices. He repeated the same to Kendricks’ and Castle’s excesses in all of life that someday, somehow, someone would slam the door shut and send them to utter darkness. They thought he meant the grave; he did, plus what awaited on the other side of it. He shuddered to think where this case might lead knowing the history of those two or where the pair of roughnecks currently resided in eternity.

Detective Pepper Love sat next to Selena on her right. Malcolm perceived a considerable lack of empathy from her since he mentioned their names. Maybe she

knew more about them than he suspected. Only problem, if stated that way, was the other Detectives in the room picked up on it as well. What to say, Ms. Love?

"I would have thought the Morning Watch caught this one. What makes this case so special?"

"Excuse you, Pepper?"

"Relax Selena, okay? I know—"

"You apparently don't know enough, okay? No, it's not okay. They bled red and blue like us and don't you ever forget that."

"I haven't forgotten a thing. Maybe you have since we do possess other homicide detectives besides ourselves who can handle case files during the three shifts that's all I'm saying—"

"I can read a bit more into it than that, Pep' Lo'. Should I elucidate or grant a ladies first courtesy?"

Malcolm allowed this, but not much more of it. Releasing the tension now he figured was akin to a grenade exploding with reparable damage than later when this case blinded the team's spirits, souls and bodies with thermonuclear devastation. He wanted to witness Pepper in this crucible EWMD or Emotional Weapon of Mass Destruction. He questioned himself if this was some manner of payback for some comments she made about his spiritual state in the recent past. As the quote went: 'God don't like ugly'. She was his best bud' in all things Christian and they long since repaired those burnt bridges with forgiveness and love. Still, it was a kind of morbid fascination to see her maturity tested like this. Like driving past a nasty car accident to inspect for any mutilated bodies.

The stunning red-boned, mid-thirties, cinnamon hair colored black detective working on almost five years with the X-Men and around seven in homicide in general, pivoted a one-hundred and eighty degree turn to her left to face Orlando. Offense built upon her elegant face. That same offense engaged her legs to push her body up and out of her chair and face-to-face with her colleague. Malcolm checked out a Chief Davis move when Pepper clasped her hands behind her the back of her pale yellow skirt. But, unlike Chief Davis, her mesmerizing brown eyes spurned Orlando's with...

"By all means Dr. Queen, thrill me with your acumen."

"You wanna go there? Gimme my Oscar now." Orlando cleared his throat and spoke with a slight southern dialect. "Why Detective Love, do you think you can dissect me with this blunt little tool called righteous indignation? You know what you look like to me, you look like a ruse. An admittedly, even to blind Bartimaeus—"

"Who hasn't been blind in a long, long time, *Bible* scholar but continue on—"

"A fine ruse...whose cushy, buppie upbringing gave you some length of the good life but prevented you from getting some length of the bone—"

"Hey Orlando, over the line. Way over," Malcolm said.

"Totally agree, Sarge."

Malcolm took in the last and newest member of the X-Men, Detective Shepard Cush. His short-sleeved navy blue shirt exposed nice muscular arms, not as big as his, but Shepard was in excellent shape. His chest stretched the fabric's white buttons and his navy slacks covered legs pushed him off the stretch of wall adjacent to Orlando's stance on his portion and toward the small gap of space between the two feuding partners. Orlando versus Shepard would be an interesting tussle. Shepard stood six-feet two inches tall and with added workout intensity, which he saw first-hand on numerous occasions as a training partner, weighed about one-hundred and eighty to ninety solid pounds. He wouldn't allow any altercation on his watch, but like he thought moments ago, he believed these spats were the opening salvo that might engulf the entire department and even the city of Atlanta.

The B.A. Criminal Justice major from Ohio State University was a homicide hunter with a perfect arrest record that continued here in Hotlanta. The navy blue man resumed the hue with solid navy blue, polished to blinding brilliance, dress shoes and dark blue leather belt. His choice of a stark white tie with a nice 'dimple' in its midst just below the knot made the shirt's buttons pop. Nice Shep' and nice to come to his sister-in-Christ's aid too. But evidently, more aid may be required because Detective Queen sir wasn't finished with his Academy Award winning performance.

"But you prayed not to be much more than a few generations from pink toed, blue bloods with a mansion and a yacht in Martha's Vineyard though you'd prefer for everyone to know that you favored the Hamptons. But being too dark for that caste with no chance for the Rockefellers, Kennedys or some other WASP family whose offspring maintained their rich ancestry through M.I.T., Harvard, Yale or Oxford, you had to slum for Howard University claiming to uplift the race and be that shining light for all the field negroes scorched by the cotton field sun—"

"Un-huh, keep mouthing off, Orlando—"

"And speaking of slummin', oh how the house negro brothas found themselves frustrated with nervous nilly teenage fingers fumbly with bra straps and the unmentionables in the backseats of your daddy's modest Chevy. And all you could think about, dream about, was to get away, to get anywhere, to get all the way to the A...P...D."

A wry smile consumed Pepper's face. "You see a lot, Dr. Queen. Humph. But let's see you point that high-powered introspection at your lustful, self-indulgent, arrogant and too stupid to realize it yet I'm praying that you will someday soon empty life. Or maybe you're just too afraid. So you pursue the chicken headed, brain-dead hookups you can manipulate and control with cries from the mountain top." She forced her pitch upward to mock a young child, "Hey, I'm still a little horny teenage boy whose animalistic impulses I don't want to control because I don't know what a real man is. However, someday I'm going to be a clueless buffoon on *The Jerry Springer Show* so a

studio audience and a nation of millions can all quadruple over onto the floor and laugh," her voice returned to normal, "at my dumb hinder part."

Orlando bit his lower lip, nodded and pointed a finger at her nose. Now, Malcolm and Shepard closed in. Even Selena stood, slipped a hand onto a Pepper forearm and gently pulled. A smoldering Orlando wrestled mentally and, with starts and stops of his retort, physically from the multitude of electrified verbal bullets' onslaught that clearly damaged, as Pepper called him, *The Terminator*, and his exo-skeleton of black leather.

"I ain't never been tested by some census taker and I ain't no cannibal, but I can take a pretty fair shot and I give a pretty good one too. A little life lesson, Pepper: Always respect everyone you meet because you just never know who knows who and what that relationship is hooked into and where that relationship could lead." Nose-to-nose with Pepper, he added in a gravelly voice, "Everyone can get got."

Now Malcolm eased Pepper back a good distance, with assistance from Selena and Shepard flanked the Homicide Sergeant's left. Malcolm breathed a little fire of his own after that one with minimal space between him and Orlando.

"Excuse me and everyone else in here? Did I just hear you threaten her, Orlando? Tell me you did not prophesize her murder, Detective?"

Backing off with cool personified and leaning against the wall again, he replied, "No Sergeant Hobbs, sir. It's like I said, I take a pretty good shot and I give a pretty good one too. And I rarely lose case-in-point."

Malcolm moved nothing and stared into Orlando's eyes. "That's good to know. Now, let's see if you can help point this case to a lawful and speedy conclusion per Chief Davis' orders. I don't believe I need to reiterate to any of you the gravity of this one. I got the file here. Get to crackin' on it right now. Dismissed."

Greyhound Bus Station
232 Forsyth Street, NW
Downtown Atlanta
8:55 A.M.

One of the big Greyhound buses' brakes whined as it finally rested along the curb at Brotherton Street, which intersected with Forsyth Street to the left of the station. A two-bus length dingy yellow awning provided cover from the Atlanta heat and other elements as the driver helped the passengers to unload their cargo. This part of Atlanta situated on the outskirts of the metropolis' downtown skyline, which rested to the northeast of the station. Taxicabs and passenger cars lined up along Forsyth's curbs in both directions as their drivers looked for new fares and expected riders, respectively. People in all manner of attire streamed out of the front doors of the tan rectangular edifice with hands full of various sized and styled suitcases, bags and backpacks. The Garnett Street MARTA or Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority was a big chipped white painted nondescript building. A small convenience store with parking allotted for a handful of cars and additional parking surfaces demarcated by old, dented chain link fences for other businesses on either side of it all constituted mere steps away from a sudden urban dilapidation.

Among the many bus patrons, a single man in a light gray zipped up windbreaker, a wrinkled white collar exposed at the neck, crinkled gray khakis and scuffed steel-toed boots waited impatiently in front of the station. His dark brown eyes dissected the couple of handfuls of human hustle and bustle. Standing six-feet one and carrying a well-distributed two hundred pounds, thirty-five year old Fabrice Mousassi admired the finer things in life and therefore appreciated the magnificent structures of modern business. What he hadn't admired was the occasional presence of Atlanta Police cruisers that flaunted their authority.

Dared to confront. Dared to rebel. Dared to resist. Dared to die. No, dared them to kill. He imagined it. Stopped the car. Got out. Pulled the piece. Squeezed the trigger. Heard the bang. Saw the flash. Smelled the cordite. Watched them fall. Savored the kill. Hungered for more. Flaunted his authority. Admired by many. Repeated and repeated again. Yeah. Where was she? There? Yeah. Now, here. Now, it started. Now, he finished it. That's what he always did. Did it better than anyone. Who? Him. Them too. They were back. They all were back with a vengeance. They were back because he was back. Who? Him. Who else? He and the Fedora Five. She was here. On time. Respected his authority. Revenge started now. He got in.

Forsyth Street Northbound

Downtown Atlanta

9:01 A. M.

"Hi ya doin', baby? A cute little mustache and goatee? That's different. I like it. You're like Mickey Rourke in *Iron Man 2* but way cooler."

"Yeah. More like Captain Jack Sparrow."

"Oh baby, Johnny Depp's the only man rogue enough to steal my heart. Way, way cooler than Mickey Rourke."

"How cool might I be today or tomorrow? How cool might I be with my five million dollars and you with your five million dollars? How cool might we be with interest on mine and your five million dollars? That's way, way, way, way, way cooler than Captain Jack flyin' in a pirate ship with Mickey Rourke providin' the power," Fabrice said.

"We'll get all ten million back, baby. We're startin' over today. Today is all that matters. They're like today's CDs—"

"You and your Compact Discs—"

"No, no, I've graduated to Certificates of Deposit. But, they're near the end of their earthly life cycles because they're obsolete. They're not lucrative deals anymore, baby."

"We're talkin' them and CDs?"

"We're talking ten million with interest, baby."

"We're talkin' them, CDs, interest and revenge?"

"We're talking revenge and murder, baby."

"Now you're talkin' the way I like for you to talk. Now, talk about the CDs."

"Oh yeah, let's."

"Talk about the CDs or the CDs that smacked your dense head against the wall. Talk about which CD convinced you to buy a BMW convertible! Talk about how that's lyin' low in a Ford until I paid my debt to society!"

"You steal gold from the Federal Reserve, you don't use a Volkswagon because you're gonna need a bit more room. I'd suggest Mack or Kenmore to get the job done right, right?"

Yeah, right. Julianna, Julianna, where art thou common sense, oh Julianna? She broke it down. She broke it all the way down to the nuts and bolts of the undercarriage they sat upon. Interstate 85 North loomed ahead. So had the coming fight. The fight to sell it for some fast cash. But he thanked her. Thanked her for the *Western Union* wire transfer. The wire transfer for his one-way bus ticket from Macon. That was after a fellow inmate's family gave him a ride. A ride from the Georgia Department of Corrections' Baldwin State Prison in Milledgeville. Milledgeville northeast of Macon. He could've had Julianna drive down to Baldwin. Could've, but he took a ride to Macon where the inmate lived to start his life over. Now, he started his own life over when he rode the Greyhound straight up I-75 North. Straight up into Atlanta where he

now sat. Sat next to Julianna. Sat next to Julianna thinkin' about work. Yeah work, that's what he had in front of him now. Work his connections to find the Fedora Fives. Work them over and get their money back. That's real work. Ah, but Julianna. She too was a piece of work. Ain't nothin' like the real thing. The real thing called a woman. Not some fantasy mind trippin' of one. Yeah, she was a piece of work all right. Worked that 36-24-34 underneath her clothing. One time she worked as a *Hooters* waitress. That's where he met her. He worked his plan. His plan worked. They hooked up. Hooked up and worked up plans. Plans to climb the criminal hierarchy known as the Fedora Fives. She ain't no *Hooters* waitress now. She ain't never gonna be again.

He stared at her and remembered. Remembered those sensual sessions. Oh, baby. Now, she worked that part of him that ain't been worked. Ain't been worked for a long time now. He soon enough fixed that though. Unfortunately, she worked his last nerve. Worked his last good non-twitchin' and non-itchin' and no need to scratch it nerve. With what? The Miss Clairol wearin', Gothic chick for the moment, he excused himself, for today. Then worked those sexy, pouty Angelina Jolie lips when she explained what he used to know of the Fedora Five was no more. Impossible. She explained and explained again. What?...Told him the organization changed and the numbers were old school now. Bottom line: Nothin' added up. Nothin' added up but one thing. Five million plus five million. Five million plus five million equaled death. Anything or anyone that increased him lived. Anything or anyone that decreased him died. Death divided and subtracted; money multiplied and added. Fabrice Mousassi and Julianna Delacroix used both. That added up to somethin'. That somethin' was a possibility. That somethin' was revenge.